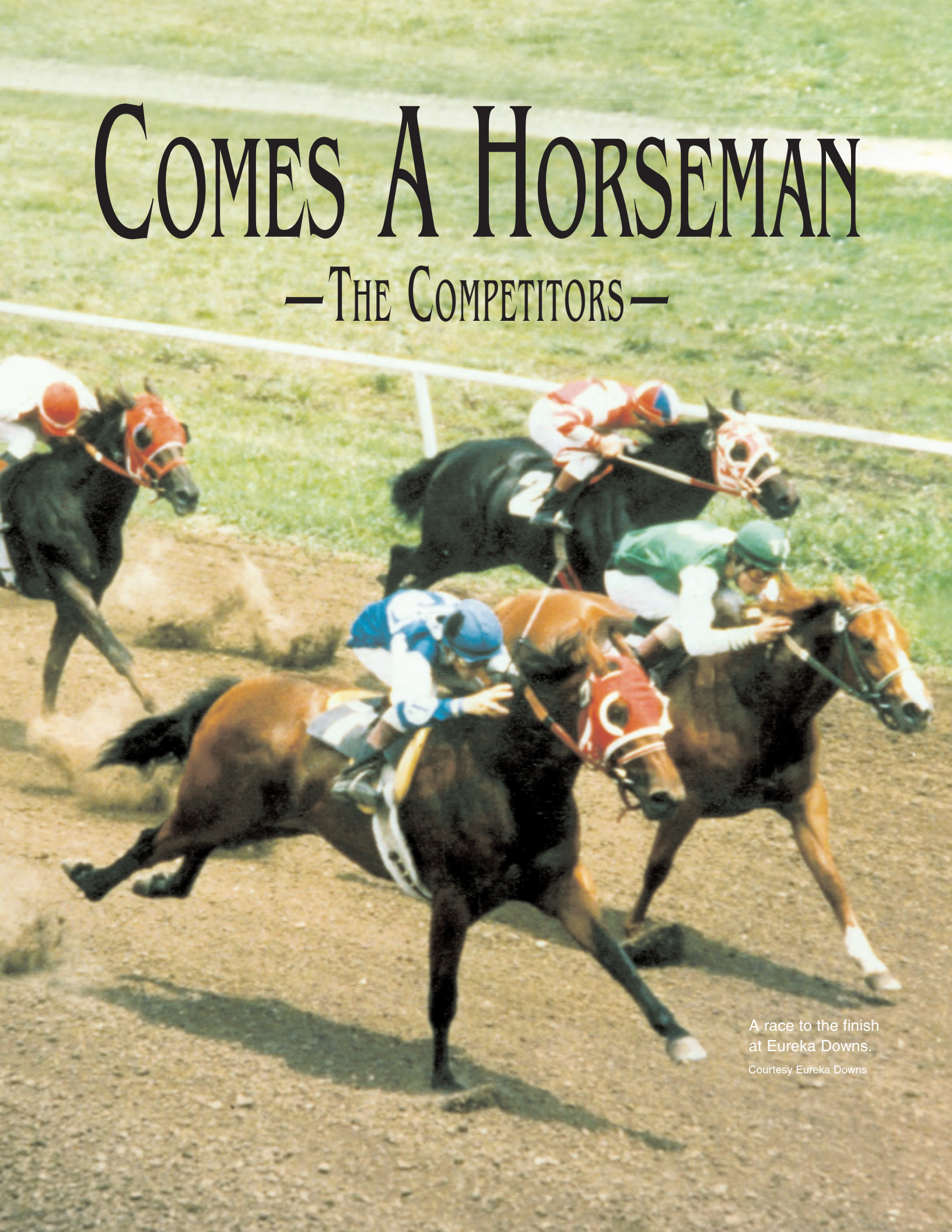
Comes A Horseman

—The Competitors—



A race to the finish at Eureka Downs.

Courtesy Eureka Downs

Stamina and speed, elegance and obedience—all qualities of a true winner. Part V, the final installment of our series on horses, follows the top-of-the-line equines as

by Bobbie Athon

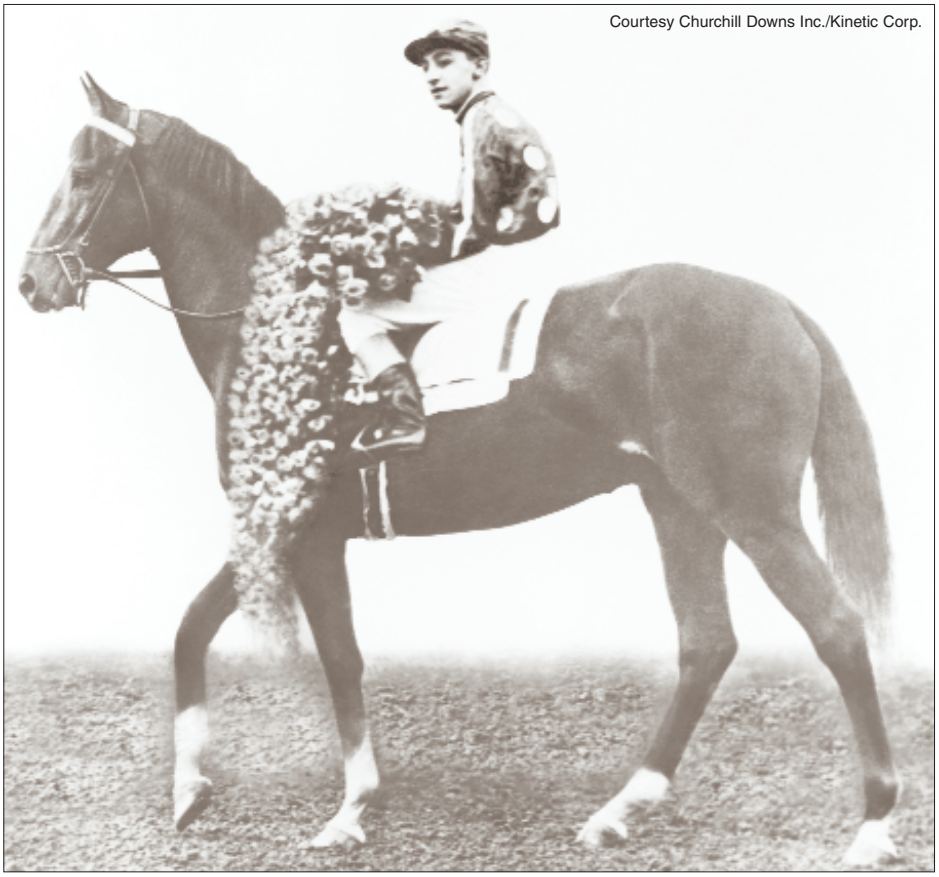
"One of the citizens of our town owned a fine little trotting horse called "Huckleberry" whose honest friendly striving made him a general favorite. . . . to cheer Huckleberry at the home stretch was a privilege."

A Kansas-born colt entered the starting gate at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky, on May 7, 1938. Sixty thousand people watched as ten horses crowded into the stalls for the running of the sixty-fourth Kentucky Derby. Lawrin, the stocky bay from Johnson County was an eight-to-one long shot. His jockey, a young but experienced rider, had never won the Derby. His trainer had no Derby experience. But when the gates sprang open, Lawrin charged down the track to make history.


Harness race champion, the great Dan Patch.

Foaled in 1935 at Woolford Farm in present-day Prairie Village, Lawrin was owned by Herbert M. Woolf. Known for his successful clothing stores, Woolf had built his farm's reputation with several winning horses. As a two-year-old, Lawrin finished second in six different starts. In 1938 the bay colt won the Flamingo Stakes in Hialeah, Florida, leading the way to the Kentucky Derby.

A late withdrawal from the Derby gave trainer Ben Jones the opportunity to secure a new jockey for Lawrin; he immediately hired Eddie Arcaro, who would become



Courtesy Churchill Downs Inc./Kinetic Corp.

Stamina and Speed (Above) Sometimes known as the Kansas Seabiscuit, Lawrin, with jockey Eddie Arcaro, unexpectedly won the Run for the Roses in 1938. Kansas's only Kentucky Derby winner was born and raised on Woolford Farm in Johnson County. (Above right) Beginning in the 1800s horseracing and harness racing became popular events across Kansas as evidenced by this Kansas Pacific Circuit racing program of 1885.

one of the racing world's foremost jockeys. Sportswriter Grantland Rice described the exciting conclusion of the race. "As they hit the head of the stretch, a horse comes daring out of the pack and streaks after Menow. For an instant no one knows which it is and then everybody sees it is Lawrin, carrying the maroon and white dots of the Woolford Farm. And Lawrin wins by a length."

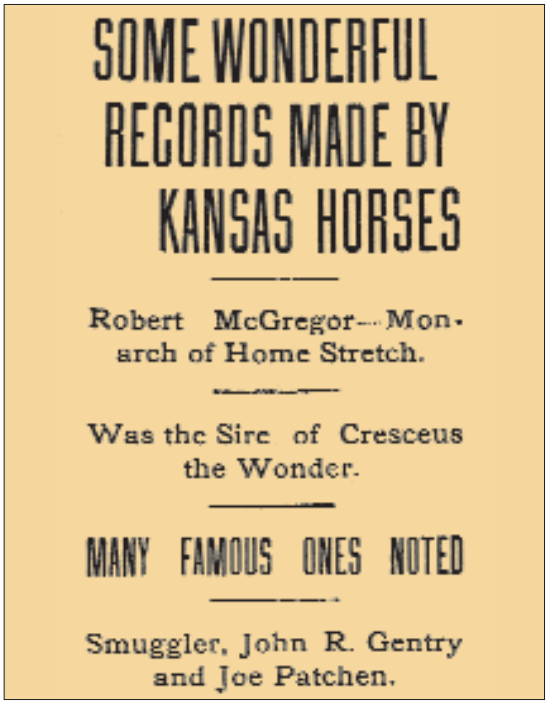
The Kansas colt was slated for further fame with the making of the 1938 motion picture Kentucky. Starring Loretta Young and Walter Brennan, this Hollywood romance focuses on Blue Grass, a long-shot racehorse. Footage from Lawrin's Derby win becomes the film's climactic moment as Blue Grass (Lawrin) pulls ahead to claim victory in the Kentucky Derby. Lawrin had a triumphant year in 1938, winning seven of eleven starts. His racing career ended in 1939 with the recurrence of a tendon injury while he was in training to face the famous Seabiscuit at the Hollywood Gold Cup. Lawrin died in 1955 and is buried near Mission and Sommerset in Prairie Village.

Although Lawrin was the first Kansas horse to compete in the Kentucky Derby, horseracing and harness racing (harness racers are trotters and pull lightweight sulkies carrying a driver) had long been popular sports in the state. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth, racing of both kinds was a highlight at many county and state fairs.

But while horseracing (known as the sport of kings) is an event Europeans brought to this country, harness racing is all American—and was popularized as a sport of the common man. Some may recall, in the musical The Music Man, Professor Harold Hill expounding the "trouble" (with a capital T) with horseracing from the commoner's point of view:

> Not a wholesome trottin' race, no!
> But a race where they set down right on the horse!
> Like to see some stuck-up jockey boy
> Sittin' on Dan Patch? Make your blood boil?
> Well, I should say.

Certainly the popularity of horse races was due in large part to wagering. Limited gambling was legal in Kansas as early as 1895, and while it was not fully legalized until 1986, betting on horses undoubtedly occurred under the radar among sports fans



SOME WONDERFUL RECORDS MADE BY KANSAS HORSES

Robert McGregor—Monarch of Home Stretch.

Was the Sire of Cresceus the Wonder.

MANY FAMOUS ONES NOTED

Smuggler, John R. Gentry and Joe Patchen.

Equine Marvels (Top left) A trotting race champion of the 1870s, Smuggler is considered the first Kansas horse to win worldwide fame. (Left) An 1889 fair poster from Cawker City features a harness race. (Above) The state's finest horses are remembered in an article from the April 4, 1909, *Topeka Daily Capital*.

and gamblers since the times of the earliest county fairs. The first legal pari-mutuel betting in Kansas occurred in 1988 at the Rooks County Free Fair in Stockton.

Claiming in 1879 that the harness racing track at Topeka's Kansas State Fair was "probably the best in the west," the Topeka Commonwealth went on to describe that year's final race between Elmo Pilot and Joe Young: "just before reaching the homestretch, Joe Young came to the front and led under the wire by a rail length." Even though he had a successful career, Joe Young, from Peabody, Kansas, would be better remembered for his more successful grandson—the great Dan Patch. Although Dan Patch was Indiana born, his roots ran deep in the Sunflower State. Dan's sire, Joe Patchen, himself a highly successful harness racehorse, also was a Kansas product, foaled at the Jewett Stock Farm in Cheney. He was known as the "iron race horse of the age." A Topeka Mail and Breeze article of December 15, 1899, proclaimed, "Patchen's untiring courage as a race-horse seems to be without peer." His more famous son, Dan Patch, was promoted at races across the country. The 1904 Kansas State Fair in Topeka designated a day in honor of the renowned trotter—Dan Patch was to be featured in the Kansas Derby as he attempted to break one of his own speed records. Unfortunately, he became seriously ill the day before. He did recover but not in time to race at the fair.

Apart from the Joe Patchen line, Kansas claims a distinguished list of harness racing champions. F. D. Coburn, Kansas Secretary of Agriculture, noted in 1899 that "Some of the horses most noted for speed, endurance and striking excellence, marvels of the equine world, and matchless, have been foaled or reared beneath the sunny skies of Kansas." These greats included Smuggler, Robert McGregor, John R. Gentry, and Athlone Ruler.

Born and bred in Ohio but reared in Olathe in the 1870s, Smuggler was not a born trotter. The Clay Center Dispatch once wrote, "There is something peculiar about his way of going. He is like a ponderous machine which has to be set in motion by degrees, and, then when once fairly under headway, is carried forward by its own momentum." Perseverance finally won him from his "sidewheel ways." He eventually became one of the great trotters of all time and was considered the first Kansas horse to win worldwide fame. Of Smuggler, Coburn noted, he "has been reared and developed in the atmosphere of Kansas, an atmosphere that has imparted to more than one horse the vigor and endurance that

enabled them to astonish the world by their wonderful performances."

Robert McGregor, who came to Shawnee County in 1873, was considered among the greatest trotters ever. The chestnut stallion, known as "The Monarch of the Homestretch," spent his Kansas days at Prairie Dell Farm, which at that time occupied the Potawatomi Mission on the grounds of today's Kansas History Center.

Stockton, who bought him for an astounding sixty-five dollars! Ruler was a trotter until an eighty-five-year-old blind man, listening to him work out, suggested the horse was a pacer. Ruler became a successful exception to the rule that trotters do not become pacers or vice versa. He readily adapted to pacing and held a victorious career in harness racing even though he faced numerous mishaps, including being badly burned, losing his driver who fell dead from a heart attack during a race, and being severely in-

Photo by Charles Cummins

Not every harness horse is a trotter, whose gait is a diagonal one—that is, opposite front and hind legs move together. Pacers use a lateral gait—front and hind legs on the same side move together. Pacing is the faster of the two, and horses rarely change from one discipline to the other.

John R. Gentry, a Kansas-bred pacer, was foaled in 1889 near Wichita at the venerable Toler Farm. Considered small in size, this "beautiful rich bay" was "the best, purest gaited pacer on the turf" and was fondly known as "the little red horse." During the 1890s he gained a reputation in some circles as the "fastest horse on earth" and for many years held the world's record for "the fastest mile ever traveled by a harness horse."

Athlone Ruler began his life in Denver around 1939, but following a knee injury, he ended up with the Hammonds of

jured in a trailer accident. The resilient horse continued to race, however, never finishing out of the money.

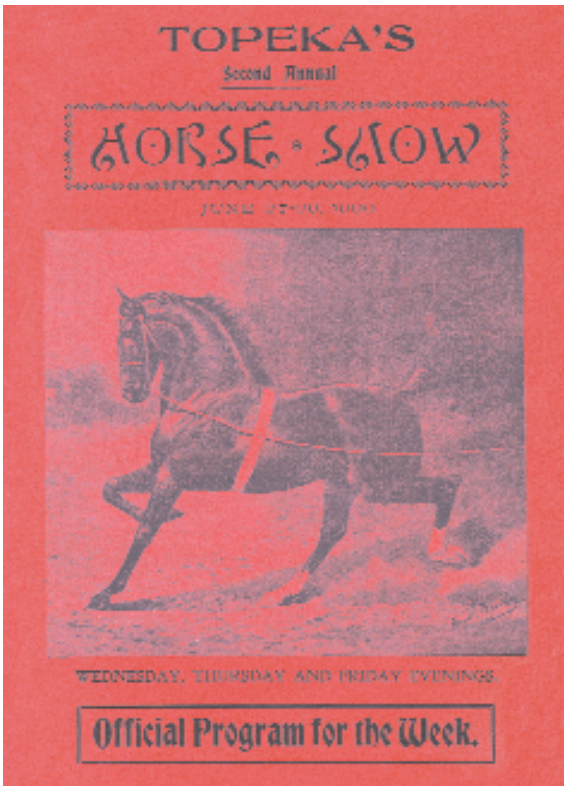
Although racing brings its own brand of excitement, Kansas horses and riders also have stirred passions in other forms of competition. Polo was once quite popular in Kansas, with riders adapting their cow ponies to this British sport. In 1891 two polo clubs—the Eagles and the Runnymedes—were thriving in the English settlement of Runnymede in Harper County. "It is surprising," reported the Harper Sentinel that year, "how quickly the cowpony catches on to the game, chasing the ball through all the runs, repulses and scrimmages with apparently as much concern as he would display in separating cattle."

Polo teams formed in other parts of the state during the early twentieth century. Old Ironsides polo squad began competing at the Topeka Round-Up Club north of Forbes Air Force Base in 1927 and played for a quarter century. "It's got all the thrills of any other sport," exclaimed player Jack Bybee. Participants and spectators at today's polo clubs in Kansas likely would agree. The horses' strength and speed, along with the players' skills, bring much excitement to the games of the Fairfield Polo Association in Haysville and Andover, and of the Mariposa Polo Club in Liberal. As one first-time spectator enthusiastically commented, "It's fast, it's fun, and filled with thunder!"

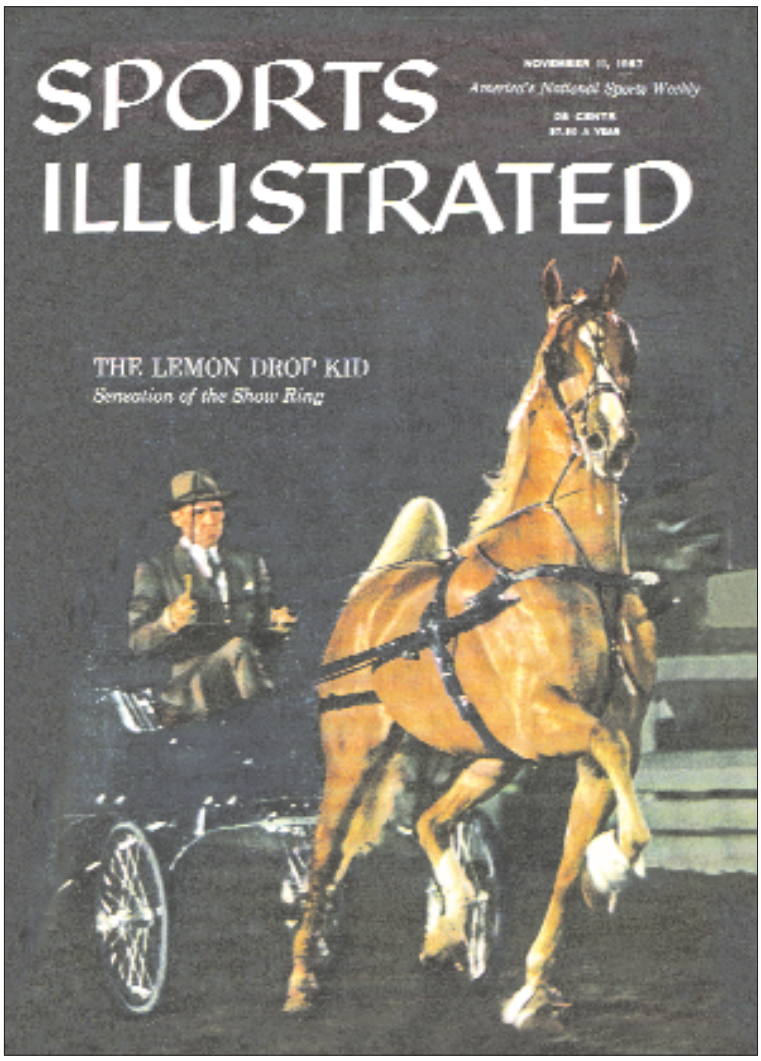
Horse shows were established in Kansas in the late nineteenth century and helped improve the quality of horses. Inspired by the American Royal in Kansas City, Missouri (one of the largest combined livestock, rodeos, and shows in the nation), horse shows of all sizes and levels sprang up across the state. They lured horsemen and women to compete in performances of varying kinds, including western, English, driving, show jumping, dressage, gymkhana events, and draft horse contests.

One of the most popular show horses of all time was The Lemon Drop Kid, the only American Saddle Horse to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated. From Sunnyslope Farm in Scott City, the golden chestnut horse with flaxen mane and tail captured the nation's attention when he won the fine harness championship stake at the American Royal from 1955 to 1958, and the world championship at the Kentucky State Fair four years in succession. Foaled in California, Lemon came to R. B. Christy's Sunnyslope Farm in 1953. As a two-year-old, he had been considered a gangling ugly duckling, and he was reckless, hard to handle, and ill-tempered. But that didn't daunt Christy, who had his eye on this "outlaw" as he lunged at full gallop into an auction arena in St.


Photo by Linda Wollaber



Working as a Team (Facing page) A match between polo clubs Flying Diamond (blue) of Norwich and Hidden Hills (green) of Andover. (Above left) Champion Morgan gelding Funquest Messenger, owned by Ken and Nancy Sherbert of Tecumseh and ridden by Sally Ann Lyle, takes a victory lap around the arena. (Above right) Horse shows had become popular throughout Kansas by the late 1800s. This program advertises the Topeka Horse Show in June 1900. (Below) Chris Smith of Terrace Lane Farm in Dickinson County poses with her Arabian show gelding Sergan.



Kay McFarland, Midnight Secret Winners at Royal

Miss Kay McFarland rode her world champion horse, Midnight Secret, to victory in the Amateur Stake at the American Royal in Kansas City Friday. Miss McFarland and Secret won the same show a year ago. Their undefeated record was climaxed last month by winning the Amateur World championship at the National Celebration Horse show in Shelbyville, Tenn.

Friday's Amateur Stake was Midnight Secret's first show since winning the world championship. Miss

World Champions (Above left) Named the greatest fine harness horse of all time,The Lemon Drop Kid of Scott City (the "Sensation of the Show Ring") is the only American Saddle Horse ever to make the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. (Above right) An article from the October 25, 1958, *Topeka State Journal* reports the latest win of Topeka's world champion Midnight Secret and his rider, Kay McFarland. The pair was never defeated.

Louis. Christy was looking for a "rebel" to give him one last chance—and he bought his Lemon for seventy-five hundred dollars. With proper training, discipline, and care, Christy's lemon turned to gold.

At the 1958 World's Championship Stake in Louisville, the crowd gave The Lemon Drop Kid a standing ovation as he "entered the ring, and as he swept around and around the arena, waves of applause followed him. He looked up into the crowd as if he were . . . saying, 'How am I doing?'" Sunnyslope Farm manager Irene Zane best described him, saying, "He's smart and he's proud, and he doesn't ever quit trying to do better." When Christy died in 1960, his beloved champion was sold to a farm in Salina, and years later Lemon returned to California, where he died in 1970 at the age of twenty-two. In 1977 the U.S. Professional Horseman's Convention honored The Lemon Drop Kid as the greatest fine harness horse of all time.

Kansas horse show history would not be complete without mention of Midnight Secret, the black Tennessee Walking Horse from McFarland Farms of Topeka. A frequent competitor at the American Royal and one of the most famous show horses of his time, Midnight Secret was shown under saddle by his young owner Kay McFarland (who later would become Chief Justice of the Kansas Supreme Court). The pair, which attracted a loyal and enthusiastic following around the country, entered thirty-one shows from 1957 to 1959. On November 29, 1959, the Topeka Capital-Journal reported Midnight Secret's final show, held in Montgomery, Alabama: "Then the crowd broke into applause as literally flowing through the gate came a spectacular black stallion, effortlessly ridden by a young woman in a bright red coat. . . . The black stallion seemed to steadily increase in power as his


Courtesy Wild Bill Hickok Rodeo Association

Best of the West (Left) The oldest continuously operating rodeo in the state, the Flint Hills Rodeo in Strong City was started in 1937 by the Roberts family. (Lower left) Barrel racing, photographed here at the Wild Bill Hickok Rodeo in Abilene, is one of the many and varied events performed by horses in western competition.

competition faded. Kay McFarland of Topeka was riding the great Midnight Secret in his thirty-first and final performance before being retired." Midnight Secret won his class that night, his rider collecting the first-place blue ribbon amid deafening applause. In thirty-one performances, the pair was never defeated.

Among the most popular and enduring horse sports in Kansas, the rodeo developed as an opportunity for cowboys to exhibit their skills. The first Kingman Cattleman's Rodeo, established in 1889 to promote the south-central Kansas town, attracted a crowd of fourteen thousand. Today this professional rodeo is a two-day event held each May.

The Flint Hills Rodeo in Strong City, started by the Roberts family in 1937, is called the oldest continuously operating rodeo in the state. Three of Emmett and Clara Roberts's children—Marge, Gerald, and Ken—became world rodeo champions during the 1940s. Today the Flint Hills Rodeo is on the professional rodeo circuit and hosts fifteen thousand people each year, the first full weekend in June, on the same rodeo grounds that have been in use since 1948.

County fairs and festivals around the state continue to offer spectators a chance to experience the thrill of a rodeo, whose core events include bareback and saddle bronc riding, bull riding, bulldogging, calf roping, and barrel racing—an event usually designated for women. But beyond the rodeo, western riding competitions are popular statewide in small local horse shows and in much larger events that attract competitors nationwide. Showing in western attire and tack, children and adults compete in a variety of classes that simulate ranch work, including western pleasure, western horsemanship, trail horse, stock horse, and cutting horse events.

While the utilitarian value of horses declined across the state with the advent of the gasoline engine, horse competition maintains a passionate following, and shows and rodeos continue to grow in popularity, drawing thousands of competitors and spectators. Kansans can still find horseracing at the Woodlands Race Track, which opened in 1989 in Wyandotte County, and at Eureka Downs, in operation for more than one hundred years in Greenwood County. While Kansas is not unique in any way to producing fine quality horses, the success of Lawrin prompted the Kansas Board of Agriculture to report in 1938: "The success of Kansas' first Derby winner merely renews our claim to distinction in the matter of horse raising. Kansas sunshine, Kansas grass, Kansas grains and hays, have been responsible for the production of a proud line of draft, saddle and light harness horses . . . it all seems to indicate that Kansans are fortunately situated when it comes to producing horsepower with extreme stamina and speed."

Editor's note: This installment concludes our five-part series on horses in Kansas, which have appeared in the autumn issues of Kansas Heritage since 2001. KH

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